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Questions on the Origins of Writing Raised by the Silk Road

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Questions on the Origin of Writing
Raised by the "Silk Road"

by Jao Tsung-i

The Pan-p'o Symbols Cannot Merely be Cor-
related with Oracle Shell and Bone Inscriptions

Regarding the long-standing problem of how writing began, many new breakthroughs have been made since oracle bones were unearthed at Anyang. Considerable knowledge about pre-Shang writing has been gained over the past thirty years from extensive discoveries of carved markings and pictographic symbols on earthenware at Pan-p'o, Chiang-chai, Lo-tu, and Ma-chia-yao. At the same time, this has been the occasion for many novel suppositions. Generally they use oracle bone inscriptions to explain the earthenware symbols, but regrettably they cannot point to many convincing links. The only characters which correspond are a few similar numerals and such forms as 丰 and 丌. As for the symbols from Lo-tu, they are practically incomprehensible.

In November 1988, I was invited to represent the Chinese University's Institute of Chinese Culture at an international conference held by the Sian Institute of Archeology on the thirtieth anniversary of Pan-p'o. An illustrated volume entitled The Pan-p'o Site was handed out at the conference, and in the "Table of Carved Symbols" was this explanation:

Here are 22 carved symbols discovered at the Pan-p'o site, numbering 113 specimens in all.... Some archeologists... have attempted to connect these symbols

with the oracle bone inscriptions of China's Shang dynasty. For instance, | and || in Row 1 of the following table have been linked respectively to + and ++; X and † in Row 2 have been glossed as 五 and 七; 丰 in Row 3 has been glossed as the oldest variant of 玉 ("jade"). Of course, these explanations do not necessarily accord with the facts....

This amounts to a further negation of past scholars who hypothesized various correspondences between oracle bone inscriptions and somewhat similar forms in Pan-p'o writing. An obvious example is the Pan-p'o | symbol, usually written |, which differs a bit from the oracle bone version of the character "十" that was written in cinnabar | (Hsiao-t'un orac. #870). That is, the former differs in being thick at the top and thin at the bottom. Also, the oracle bone form for ++ is written ||, with a connection at the bottom between the two lines. It would be a mistake to link this to 二. There were bone and horn utensils among the objects excavated at Pan-p'o and Chiang-chai, but there were no jade utensils. Although one or two utensils seemingly made of jade have turned up at other Yang-shao sites, it is still a dubious proposition that 丰 is a variant of 玉.

This group of symbols remains an unsolved riddle.

Over the past thirty years of research into the symbols of Pan-p'o, a wide variety of views has emerged. I have taken part in several discussions on ancient writing systems, in China and abroad, including the international "Écriture" conference held in Paris during April 1980, the September 1982 Conference on Shang history in Hawaii, and the 1982 international symposium on ancient Chinese writing at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Subsequently I attended an international conference on Shang studies held on-site at An-

yang. All of these conferences resulted in the publication of special volumes of proceedings. Studies of the Pan-p'o symbols did not go beyond a search for correspondences with oracle bone inscriptions or ethnic minority writing systems. But only isolated instances of correspondence were found, and these were never enough to persuade people.

Recently, Peking University's Ch'iu Hsi-kui in his Outline of Graphology has also expressed disagreement with those who draw correspondences between the geometric symbols of the Pan-p'o type and the representational symbols of the ancient Han Chinese writing system.

It is therefore necessary that we break new ground.

In recent years, bone implements and tortoise shells with symbols carved on them have been discovered at certain Neolithic sites. Finds such as the still-disputed bone implements of the Lung-shan culture in Shensi and the newly discovered tortoise plastrons from Chia-hu, Honan prove that the characters used for divination with tortoise shells and animal bones since Shang and Chou times actually have remote origins dating back seven or eight thousand years. This has given people an utterly new view of the subject. It shows that incised writing existed in its beginning stages as early as the time of the P'ei-li-kang culture, and that Shang-era oracle bone writing had already reached quite a mature stage. From the Chia-hu tortoise shells down to the era of Wu-ting there was an interval of nearly five thousand years, which is still a blank with respect to the formation of written characters. This blank remains to be filled as more underground relics are exhumed in the future.

A New Approach







Most intriguing of all is the discovery in Chou-yüan, at a Western Chou building site, of a carved-shell human head, on


which is inscribed the character 卂. (See Fig. 1, from Chou-yüan and Chou Culture by Chen Ch'üan-fang) More information on this is given in Yin Sheng-p'ing's "An Investigation of the Racial Affinities of the Western Chou Human Head Carved of Shell" in Wen-wu, 1986 No. 1, and "A Study on the Racial Makeup of the Ancient Chinese People" in K'ao-ku hsüeh-pao, 1984 No. 2.



In fact, a symbol having the same form as this 卂 can be traced back to pottery implements from 5500 B.C.E., at the West Asian site of Halaf, where several examples were found. Also the shoulder of a goddess figure, belonging likewise to the Halaf period, also bears the carved mark 卂. (See Fig. 2).

The discovery of this human head carved from shell was made in Sector 2 of the Western Chou palace site at Chao-ch'en Village, Fu-feng County, Shensi. It was wearing a tapered cap and only a bit more than half of the head is intact. The head is 2.8 centimeters high and has a prominent nose and deep-set eyes. It is Caucasian in race, and has the character 卂 carved atop its head. In the opinion of some, this was a member of the Wusun people of Greater Ju-chih^(or Yüeh-chih), who lived in what is now Kansu and Ninghsia and had frequent contact with the Chou. The carved character 卂 (卂) on its head may possibly indicate the holding of a magus' office. In addition, the ruins at Chou-yüan have also yielded flat tiles, and the rope-marked upper surface of the tiles is also carved with 卂 characters. These are two new items of data from recent years regarding 卂. (See Fig. 3)

Research has already been done by some into the ethnicity of this Caucasian figure. Because the head appears to be wearing a pointed cap, some have thought it to be a member of the Scythian people described by Herodotus in his history. My friend Lin Mei-ts'un feels it is a Tocharian, a people who also wore this type of cap and about whom there have been

numerous discoveries in the Tarim Basin and the Loulan-Niya area. For corroborating evidence he points to the first century B.C.E. Ju-chih relics found in 1918 at Afghanistan's Golden Hill at Tillya-tepe. He claims that the gold objects include a gold scabbard having numerous  characters incised around the edge as a decoration, and he raises this as evidence for those who search for the ethnicity of the head which bears this  symbol. But I have carefully read the article by V.I. Sarianidi: the symbol incised on the scabbard is , not .  is the svastika and is not equivalent to . It seems that Mr. Lin did not have a clear idea of this. (See Fig. 4. For more information, see V.I. Sarianidi: "The Treasure of Golden Hill," American Journal of Archeology, April, 1980)

Halaf is located near Turkey, and at one time it was situated in the Ottoman realm. It is one of the key sites of prehistoric culture in Western Asia. The  mark carved on the above-mentioned goddess figure is generally referred to in the West as a Maltese cross. It was excavated from a spot in northern Iraq named Arpeschayah. These materials have been collected in the archaeological report of M.E.L. Mallowan entitled Iraq, Vol. 2, p. 81 (Arpechayah). The reproduction here is from B.L. Goff's Symbols of Prehistoric Mesopotamia. The symbol on the goddess figure's shoulder is said to have been colored red, or in the conventional Chinese phrase, "marked with crimson". The discoverers believe it must have had some religious significance. The triangular shapes or Maltese crosses on West Asian pottery are said to have been auspicious symbols representing fertility.

As for the  symbol in West Asia, its distribution was quite broad, and its origins can be traced back to a stone scepter bearing the character  which appeared northeast of the Dead Sea in the famous Teleilat Ghassul culture layer of

the first half of the 4th millennium B.C.E. (See Alexis Mallon, Robert Koeppel, and René Neville's archeological report, Teleilāt Ghassūl, 1934-40, Rome). The Czech archeologist B. Hrozný, who was the first in the world to decipher the Hittite pictographs, has stated that the origins and diffusion of the widely distributed 𐎲 symbol will have to be sought in Central and West Asia.






The character 𐎲 appeared rather late on Chinese pottery. It can be seen both at Hsiao-ho-yen in Manchuria and in the Ma-ch'ang period of Ma-chia Cave culture at Lo-tu in Liu-wan, Chinghai Province.


After making a trip to Chinghai in August, 1983, I wrote the paper "A Study of 𐎲." As a tribute to my long-time friend from the Eastern Isles, Professor Mikami Tsugio, this was translated into Japanese and incorporated in the "History" section of Essays in Honour of Prof. Dr. Tsugio Mikami on His 77th Birthday, August, 1985. (Ōta Ariko, transl.)

I still believe that the sign 𐎲 must stem from West Asia, and I have collected supporting data in recent years. The treatises on symbols by Western scholars G. d'Alviella, D.A. Mackenzie, and J.C. Cooper give important references, which I hope to discuss in detail someday.

The character 𐎲 appears dozens of times in China's oracle bone inscriptions, and it is commonly identified as 𐎲, in the sense of magian arts. This is hardly open to dispute. Recently I wrote a long article discussing various meanings of the character 𐎲, which attracted the notice of my American friends E.L. Shaughnessy and Victor H. Mair. It is being translated and will be published in the next issue of Early China. This article does not discuss the forms of the character 𐎲, or its connection with West Asia.

The West Asian sign 𐎲 is carved on a goddess figure's shoulder, and at Chou-yüan it is carved on the head of a

Caucasian figure. Both are plainly instances of Western customs. Using oracle bone inscriptions for interpretation, we may affirm that the Caucasian head from Chou-yüan is a magus. Taking into account the West Asian meaning, the symbol represents auspiciousness, and perhaps has some other mysterious meaning. How remarkable that the Shang and Chou character  is completely identical in form to the West Asian symbol! The grave in Afghanistan has been identified as the burial site of a Ju-chih person, and over 20,000 metal objects have been discovered which date back to the first century B.C.E. The scabbard is decorated with the sign , which was also in widespread use in Neolithic China. I feel that the identical form of the West Asian  and the oracle bone character  is definitely not a coincidental or superficial resemblance. It is possible that this points to a deep level of intermingling which is worthy of further study. I am posing a brand new question here! If the character  is truly connected with West Asia, then ideas on the origin of Chinese writing will take on a new look!

Recent research on relics of the Yangshao colored pottery culture shows that K'a-yüeh, Hsin-tian and T'ang-wang period cultures were left by the ancient Hsi-chih and Ch'iang peoples. Also, the Sha-ching period culture was left by the Lesser Ju-chih people in the area of the Ku-ho and Huang. Though it may not have been a Ch'iang culture, it must have belonged to the Western Jung and their tribes. Thus the symbols on the pottery of Lo-tu and Ma-chia Cave in Chinghai can be viewed as relics of the Western Jung.¹ The Greater Ju-chih belonged to the Wusun stock, and in the Han they lived among the Ch'i-lian Mountains near Tunhuang. Later they moved westward. The carving of a  (magus) character on the above-

¹Yu Wei-ch'ao: "A New Understanding of the K'a-yüeh and Hsin-tian Cultures" (Chung-ya hsüeh-k'an, No. 1).

mentioned head proves that the office of magus in the Western Chou ancestral temple was filled by a Ju-chih person. From this we can see that there was mingling between Chinese and non-Chinese peoples.

Consider also the two-handled urn exhumed from a stone coffin of the Ch'iang tribe in Mao-wen, Szechwan. There are symbols carved on this urn in both recessed and raised lines. This is what Sung scholars distinguished as relief marks versus inscriptions. (I quote from the Tung-t'ien ch'ing-lu chi: "On ancient vessels relief markings protrude from the surface, and inscriptions are cut into the surface. Raised lines are relief-marks, and recessed lines are inscriptions.") In the site report there is a table of 27 carved symbols, among which are the following:

| , + , X , and ↓ are the same as at Pan-p'o.

, √ , † as at Lo-tu, Chinghai.

There are also some similar to characters from Erh-li-t'ou, which indicates that the inhabitants of Mao-wen, Szechwan were indivisibly connected to the ancient Western Ch'iang people.²

In fact, forms similar to the oracle bone symbols | , || , X, + , 丅 , 丰 have turned up commonly in the West Asian areas of Uruk and Elam. These are not unique to Shang dynasty writing, as I have explained in detail elsewhere.

The cultures of Pan-p'o and Chiang-chai are similar, and the symbols on their pottery are consistent. In the Wei River watershed, most of these Yang-shao period symbols are carved over black lines. The symbols carved on First Period relics, as presented in the Chiang-chai report, dovetail nicely with the symbols of Liu-wan. In the Western

². See the report on the excavation of a stone coffin, Mao-wen Ch'iang Minority Autonomous County (Wen-wu tzu-liao ts'ung-k'an, July 1983); "Ting-t'an Culture Gravesite with Symbols Carved in Pottery at Lan-tang-ssu, Hsi-ho, Kansu" (K'ao-ku, Aug. 1987).

Chou a Caucasian served in the office of magus and bore the character 𠂇 on his head. But this far-travelled character can be traced to an identical form on the pottery of Halaf in West Asia. Between the two there is possibly a relationship, but which preceded the other? That is hard to say for sure. In remote antiquity there must have been a long period of interchange over the Silk Road that we cannot imagine today. But some sort of contact could not be avoided. In this may be revealed long-buried truths about mankind's cultural interchanges, and with these revelations will come important clues to solve the riddle of the symbols of Pan-p'o and other areas.

The Near Eastern Sumerians were the first to use linear representational notations. They have long been regarded as the most ancient creators of the written word. The pictographic hieroglyphs of the Egyptians and the proto-Elamite pictographs are said to have been influenced by them. But the dates of Pan-p'o and Chiang-chai are 4770-4290 B.C.E. and 4673-4545 B.C.E., while the dates of the Sumerian Uruk IV are at the earliest 3300-2900 B.C.E.³ The dates of Pan-p'o and Chiang-chai are comparatively early. But the pottery symbols of Halaf are even more ancient than that.

Ming-pao yüeh-k'an (Ming Pao Monthly (September, 1990), 47-50.

Translated by Denis C. Mair and Victor H. Mair

³ See Cambridge History of the Ancient World Vol. 1 Part 2, "Babylonia" Sec. 2: "Sumerians as Inventors of Writing and Its Application to History."

Figures

扶风召陈西周建筑遗址中出土的蚌雕人头像

这两枚人头像出土于陕西扶风县召陈村西周建筑遗址乙区的灰坑中。与这两枚人头像一起出土的，有西周瓦片、残石器等。人头像系蚌雕，蚌的厚度为1.5—2厘米。1号头像完整，2号头像只存大半。1号头像的头顶刻有一“王”字。头像皆高鼻深目，显系白色人种，属白色人种的大月氏、乌孙。汉代居敦煌、祁连山之间，因受匈奴的逼迫而向西迁移。据近人考证，汉代以前，大月氏、乌孙等族居留于今甘肃、宁夏之间，当与周原有来往。1号头像的头顶所以刻有“王”字，可能就是充任“王”的职司的。

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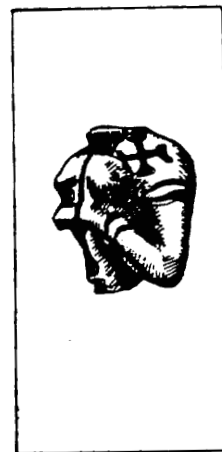


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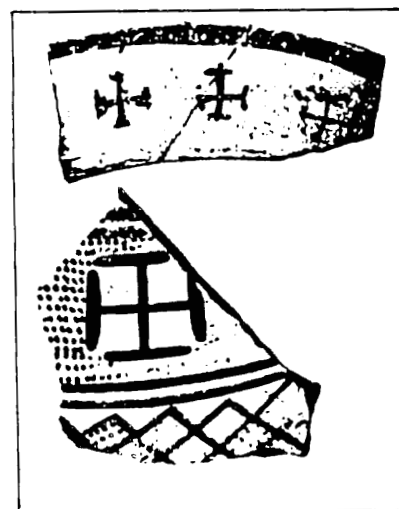
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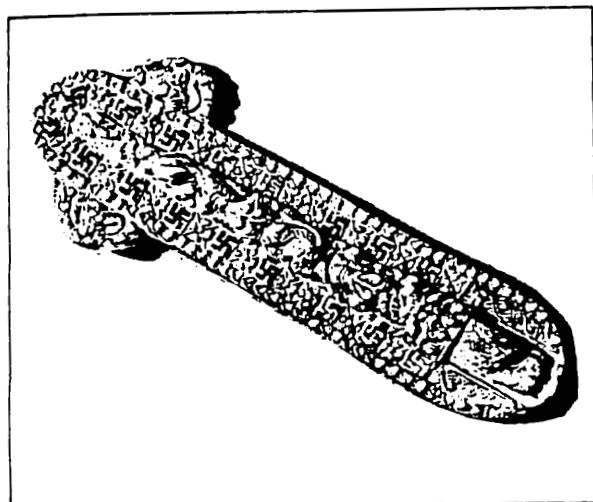


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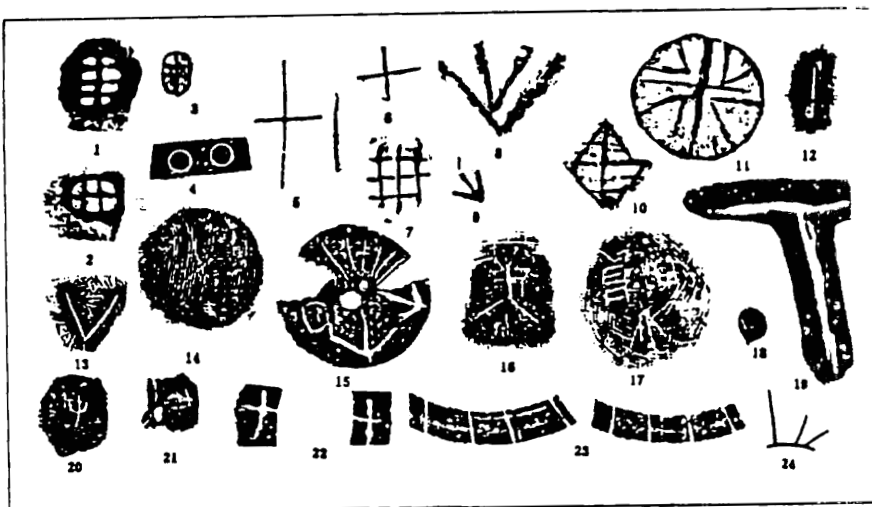


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